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# Response to Rowbotham

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# Response

Alireza Javaheri

Sheila Rowbotham's essay has four chief virtues. First, it highlights the notion of emancipation and how claims of livelihood and self-determination have, through their connection and separation, influenced feminist histories. Second, it shows how ideas of self-determination (either implying individual rights or collective efforts to gain equality, and the struggles for livelihood which encompass both poverty and "career concerns," wage inequalities, and gender burdens) have engaged women globally to fight against the rigid patriarchal structures that have kept them oppressed. Third, the essay underlines the need for us to look at history in order to find new ways to fight against the negative effects of the global economy. Fourth, it raises the significance of the term *livelihood* when it comes to women of color and Third World feminism. These concepts open up a more in-depth examination of some of the different ways that women of color have come together and organized against oppressive politics locally and globally.

This essay enabled me to pose some questions concerning the connections between feminisms and women's struggles for self-determination and livelihood on local and global levels. It also encouraged me to call into question the dynamics of race, class, and sexuality when it comes to the creation of transnational feminist organizations.

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I found Sheila Rowbotham's article inspiring since she brings up specific examples from history in order to help us understand and theorize about the trends within feminism and women's movements. Rowbotham uses the concepts of livelihood and self-determination, with examples from Western history, to show how feminisms have developed through women's movements and struggles to change their particular situation even though it has not always been done under the name of "feminism."

The concepts that Rowbotham introduces provide a platform for examining, connecting, and relating feminisms. I will suggest two ways of expanding these concepts that can help us further our discussion: first, by examining how and to what extent these concepts are connected in different periods and in various feminisms; and also, how

they are relational. It is important for us to situate the framework in terms of a dialogue between feminisms rather than as a linear development of a single or dominant movement.

This essay pushed me to look beyond theory and focus on actual histories of communities that have interested me, specifically black feminism in the U.S. and Iranian feminism and women's movements. Given the space constraints, I have chosen to talk mainly about Angela Davis since I believe that she has contributed a lot to the black feminist movement, and her influence reaches far beyond the borders of the U.S. When describing Iranian feminism, I focus on the Iranian revolution as one particular moment in Iranian history when different women's movements converged.

What black feminism has in common with Iranian feminism is that they both have been seen as marginal by the dominant white, Western society. By looking at these movements especially with regard to the connection between livelihood and self-determination, we can better understand the context that they have created and ways in which they are related to other movements.

Angela Davis is an example of a feminist who has been an inspiration to millions of women around the world through her activism and writing. Davis writes about the impact of history and has made comparisons between the role of black women within the institution of slavery and their continued discrimination under capitalism. By making these connections, she is exploring the particular context for African American women, linking the struggles for political rights with ways of livelihood. She has been able to connect the need for an economic change in the U.S. to the continual racism that has affected the African-American community for centuries. As Davis states: "Under the impact of racism, the black woman has been continually constrained to inject herself into the desperate struggle for existence. She—like her man—has been compelled to work for wages, providing for her family as she was previously forced to provide for the slave-holding class."<sup>1</sup>

Davis has tried to raise awareness of the biased legal system in this country and has shown that "between 1980 and 1992 the female prison population increased by 276 percent, compared to 163 percent for men."<sup>2</sup> She also argues that the rates are growing more for black women in comparison to black men or white men. One of the most important messages that Davis has tried to spread is the fact that the legal system in the U.S. is based on structural racism, and that due to

the growing numbers of black women in prison, the system is also gendered and has had dire consequences for black women.

At first, one might wonder what the American justice system has to do with self-determination and the fight against global capitalism, but the link between these issues is strong. Ever since the Reagan era, the emphasis on privatization and dismantling the welfare state has had a significant impact on working class communities of color. Due to the growing poverty and hopelessness it creates in the community, people have been forced into a situation where they are targeted by the criminal justice system. In connection with rising unemployment (partly because of production moving outside the U.S. and legitimized by trade agreements such as NAFTA), this gives the struggles for livelihood not only a local but also a global dimension. Angela Davis states, "ironically, prisons themselves are becoming a source of cheap labor that attracts corporate capitalism."<sup>3</sup>

One approach to fight the American legal system is by organizing against global capitalism. This can come about by acknowledging the structural racism and sexism that goes hand in hand with the judicial system, and the link between the global fight against capitalism and the local struggles for policy change and community awareness around incarceration. In the case of female incarceration, it has been important to look at the history of this country and to draw comparisons between the radical fights against slavery and the demand for change around the issue of punishment and prisons. Davis states: "this late twentieth-century 'abolitionism' with its nineteenth-century resonance, may also lead to a historical recontextualization of the practice of imprisonment."<sup>4</sup>

When organizing against global capital, some of the challenges that Davis and other feminists of color have faced have been the differences surrounding ideology and identity. Davis has managed to work around these issues since she has been flexible about the idea of coalitions and alliances and has never tried to have a fixed notion of what a coalition should look like. In her essay, Sheila Rowbotham gives examples of when women's movements converged with the suffrage movement, nationalist movements, and the civil rights movement. Davis, in the same way, has tried to connect the black feminist movement with various other movements such as the national gay and lesbian movement on the issue of racism in the GLBT community, or progressive political movements when it comes to economic issues. One of her

most important points that ties to Rowbotham's contentions is when she highlights:

[t]he importance of historical memory in our contemporary efforts to work together across differences. I raise the importance of historical memory not for the purpose of presenting immutable paradigms of coalition building, but rather in order to understand historical trajectories and precisely to move beyond older conceptions of cross-racial organizing.<sup>5</sup>

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At the end of her essay, Rowbotham discusses how important it is that ideas of self-determination and livelihood in different parts of history reconnect again into global movements against capitalism. Here, I would like to draw attention to an event which connected different groups of women who fought for both equality and justice and who, at least for a short while, inspired women outside of their own national borders. The event was the Iranian revolution when secular and religious women came together in order to topple the Pahlavi state. Many of the secular women's organizations did not want a religious state but felt that the only way they could challenge the current structure was through an alliance with the religious women. Most women, despite differences of class and religious belief, celebrated the revolution and saw it as the first step toward improving their status within the family, the workplace, and the wider society. In connecting their struggles for political rights with the basic questions and demands of livelihood, the two examples of union organizing and veiling stand out.

During the time of the revolution, there was an opportunity for trade union activities and many of the demands had to do with equal wages, participation in decision making, and better working conditions. When Khomeini gained power, he ordered the unions to be dismantled but during that time of the struggle, there were many women who were not workers but who were sympathetic to the cause and fought for the women unionists to continue their work.

Regarding the issue of veiling, women from different classes joined together to demonstrate against the state's new laws that made veiling compulsory. They chose the International Women's Day to demonstrate. It is important to realize that for some of the religious women the notion of veiling was a strong piece of their resistance. However,

they felt that it should be up to the individual woman to decide whether she wanted to veil herself or not. I think it is essential to discuss the reasons why these women from different classes, religious beliefs, and geographic locations came together to successfully topple the government, and did not back down on their convictions even when they realized that the government they put in power also discriminated against them. For the women demonstrators, the revolution symbolized liberation from what they saw as a Western monarchy that was turning Iran into a copy of the West. For many of them, this was the first time in history when women could stand up and demand to be heard. Now, over twenty years after the revolution, one can discuss whether most of those women are happy with the current situation for women in Iran, but during that momentous time, I think many women had great hopes for the future.

Much can be learned from the way Iranian women organized to make the revolution happen. They learned to negotiate and prioritize and they gathered around a common goal, which made them even more forceful. They were also against capitalism and the way the gap between the rich and the poor had expanded in Iran. Even if some groups of women came from the left and others were religious, they all were certain that they wanted something different than capitalism or communism; hence, their slogan, "Not left, Not right, Islamic revolution." I doubt that many of those women would call themselves "feminists" or even would agree to demonstrate under such a banner if they were aware of such an ideology, but I am still certain that they all fought for their own self-determination and rights.

With black feminism and Iranian feminism one can see that there have been examples where the notions of self-determination and self-fulfillment have converged, but not necessarily under the expressed ideals of a particular kind of feminism. It is also crucial to acknowledge that these movements have a separate history from Anglo-American feminist history, and that some of them grew simultaneously with Anglo-American feminism. As Benita Roth states: "From the standpoint of chronology and ideology, Black feminism is at the center of the story of second-wave feminism, not a variant but constitutive of the core of the feminist legacy of that era."<sup>6</sup> Black feminism started out at the same time as white feminism. The reason why its story has not been told is because it did not join the white mainstream feminist movement, and because the racism in that movement prevented the spread of the history of black feminism.

As Sheila Rowbotham mentioned, it is necessary to go back and look at the forgotten connections in history where emancipation has been or tried to be conceived. One way to do that is to look at Third World feminism and feminists of color who have for decades fought and organized around oppression due to race, class, gender, and sexuality. They have voiced their concerns when feminists have tried to prioritize one above the other. An important task for us, then, is not to presume that all the different feminist movements have the same history and that we can understand all of them by looking at only one. We should emphasize the forgotten histories of feminisms that have been marginalized and have never had the chance to exist at the center together with white feminist history. I believe bell hooks is accurate and to the point when she writes about the dilemmas within global feminism. She argues that historically Anglo-American feminists proclaimed the need for gender equality in their countries but did not seek to find out if corresponding movements were taking place among women around the world. Since Western women liberated themselves at that point, they felt that they were in a position to liberate their less fortunate sisters, namely, women in the "Third World." Some examples are the way Muslim feminism has been viewed by the majority of Western feminists or the way female genital mutilation or veiling has been discussed. Few feminists link those behaviors in Third World countries with life threatening eating disorders or drastic cosmetic plastic surgery in the Western world. This kind of thinking has created a hegemonic rhetoric about feminism and the notion that all women in the West are "free" and should therefore lead the feminist movement globally. As hooks states: "Most white women have not decolonized their thinking either in relation to racism, sexism, and class elitism they hold towards less powerful groups of women in this society or the masses of women globally."<sup>7</sup> Until this decolonization and deeper understanding of the histories of women of color and working class women happens, it is not possible to discuss a just and equal global women's movement that fights against transnational capitalism.

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In closing, when we examine feminisms using the concepts of livelihood and self-determination, looking at how they connect in particular contexts and also examining the ways in which these contexts are related to one another, we will gain a deeper understanding of the

lessons we can draw from the histories of feminisms. The mainstream feminist movements in the West must analyze their own role in the white, patriarchal, capitalist society, and must link women's issues in the Western world to issues elsewhere. An important task of feminist theorists is to examine the relational connection between different feminisms and women's movements and how they each in their own way have dealt with issues of self-determination and livelihood. By linking women's concerns instead of building hierarchies of which issues are more pertinent and what dilemmas are more "dehumanizing," I believe we can build coalitions that can fight against the problems that oppress millions of women around the world every day. By engaging in dialogues, like the Roundtable, we will hopefully gain a better understanding of how different feminisms have come about, where they converge, and the problems that exist within and amongst them.

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### Notes

1. Joy James, ed., *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 126.
2. Ibid., p. 64.
3. Ibid., p. 67.
4. Ibid., p. 72.
5. Ibid., p. 301.
6. Benita Roth, "The Making of the Vanguard Center," *Still Lifting, Still Climbing*, edited by Kimberly Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1999), p. 83.
7. bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), p. 45.